

The mysterious causee of indirect causatives

In this talk, I examine the syntax of Icelandic indirect causatives, with the goal of understanding how they fit within the overall voice system of the language. I will show how such constructions support the view that the active/passive dichotomy is too coarse-grained, and that “active” and “passive” are not primitive notions in grammar.

Indirect causatives are causative constructions where the causee is left implicit. An example is given in (1).

- (1) Ég lét byggja hús.
 I.NOM made.PST build.INF house.ACC
 ‘I made (someone) build a house.’

As indicated in the translation, (1) means that I made someone build a house; the causee, however, is not expressed overtly.

Perhaps the simplest analysis would say that the causee just isn't there, and that *láta* ‘let/make’ simply takes a bare VP complement, with no external argument. In fact, this very analysis has been proposed for Swedish (Taraldsen 1984; Lundin 2003), Hiaki (Harley 2013), Italian (Folli & Harley 2007), and Icelandic (Wood 2011; Wood & Sigurðsson 2014), among other languages. However, drawing first on the line of work in Alexiadou et al. (2015), I will provide evidence that there must at least be a Voice layer in the embedded event. The Voice layer accounts for:

- the acceptability of certain by-phrases naming the agent of the embedded event
- the availability of instrument phrases modifying the embedded agent
- transitivity restrictions on the embedded event
- the morphological form of the embedded verb

Given this much, we might consider analyzing the embedded Voice head as passive, as in Pitteroff's (2014) analysis of similar constructions in German. There are reasons, though, to think that in fact, the construction is more “active” than that, with a silent, syntactically projected ϕ P argument in the causee position, as in Legate's (2014) analysis of “grammatical object passives”. This accounts for:

- restrictions on the availability of (the above-mentioned) agentive by-phrases
- the impossibility of A-moving the embedded object when *láta* ‘let/make’ is passivized
- the availability of explicitly recovering the implicit agent under sluicing
- the acceptability of indirect causatives formed with verbs that do not normally passivize

The resulting analysis fits indirect causatives into the voice system, but only if we go beyond the classic active/passive dichotomy, and treat voice alternations not as primitives, but as the products of individual, interacting components.

References

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